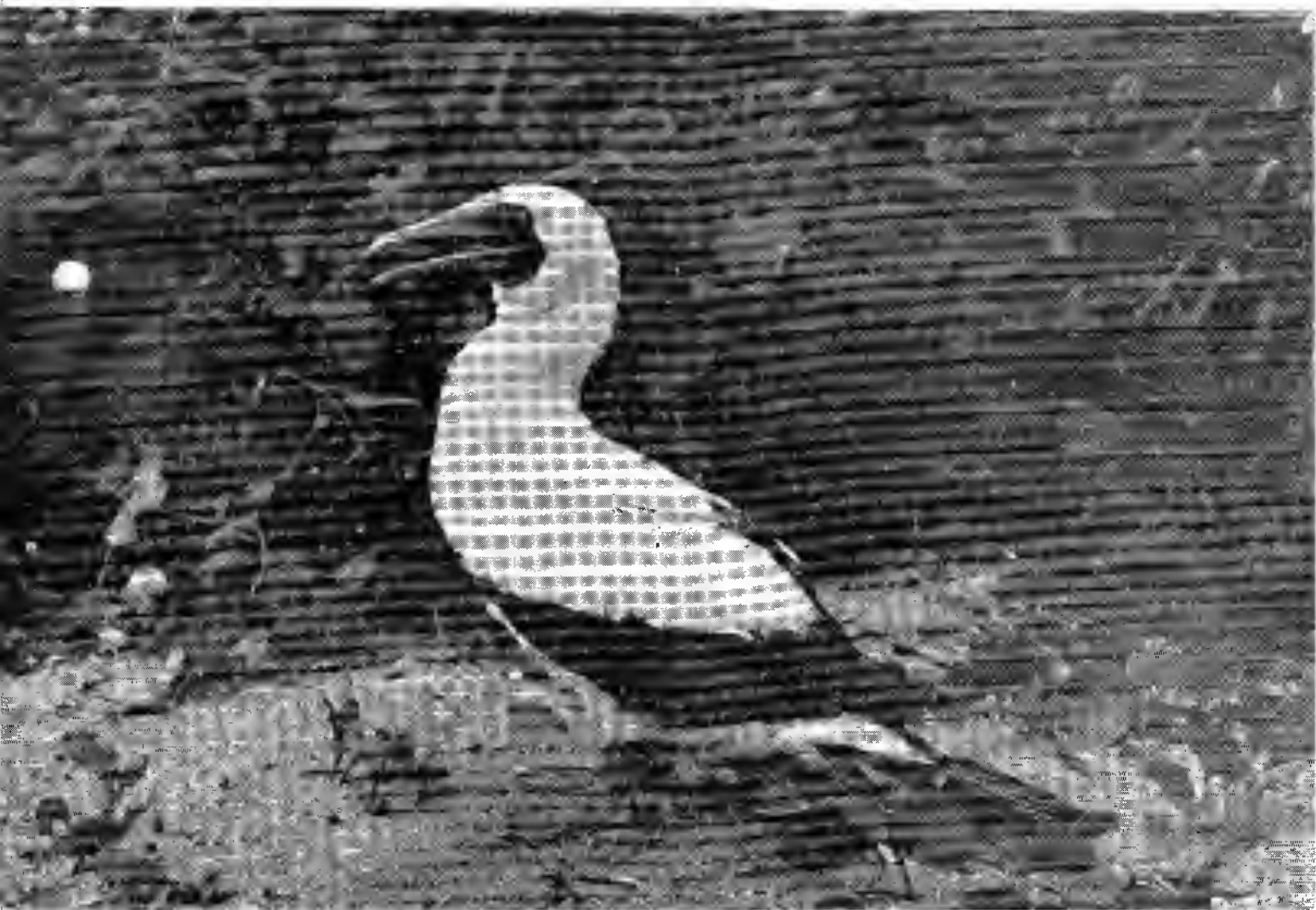


# Newsletter for Birdwatchers

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NEWSLETTER  
FOR BIRDPWATCHERS

Vol. XXVI

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### Editorial

Good Material Flows in: The Newsletter has had a piece of great luck and we are able to publish two good pieces by two English Ornithologists who visited India in February. It is obvious not only that both of them have the experts knowledge of our birds, but that they understand, love and enjoy all aspects of our natural life and features. This makes them the best kind of friends our country can ever have.

Mr. Madge is a retired school teacher who has spent several years in Malaysia and in retirement he escapes the rigours of the English winter by travelling to various countries to enjoy their bird life. The first portion of his article is published in this issue and will be continued in the next. The Editor is most grateful to Mr. Lavkumar Khachar for acquiring this article for us.

The other piece, a short article on Birds Of Dodda Gubbi is by Richard Fitter, the famous ornithologist who is also well known for his work in the Fauna and Flora Preservation Society of London, and through several forums like the Species Survival Commission of I.U.C.N.

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Conservation Studies on Raptors (Circular by I.C.B.P.)  
Birds of prey are an awe-inspiring and fascinating group of birds. Their status and conservation are of special concern because of their value as bio-indicators. What harms them is likely to threaten us in future.

Papers by experts from all over the world are included in Conservation Studies on Raptors, fifth in the technical Publication Series from ICBP. Special attention is focussed on the plight of raptors in the Mediterranean. Sections are also devoted to Tropical Forest Raptors, and Migration of Raptors. Eight papers are devoted to the Peregrine Falcon. In addition to these studies, a major section deals with Management and Conservation issues.

Conservation Studies on Raptors is the result of the Second World Conference on Birds of Prey held at Thessaloniki, Greece, in 1982, organised by the ICBP World Working Group on Birds of Prey. Included in the volume are the proceedings of the Workshop on the Biology of Vultures. Write to ICBP 219c Huntingdon Road, Cambridge CB3 0DL, England for copies. Price £ 25.50 free mailing.

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New service by Birders: 46 Westleigh Drive, Sonning Common, Reading, Berks, England RG4 9LB: Birders is a new agency offering a unique service to Bird artists and photographers. They specialise exclusively in ornithological subjects; and offer;

1. Photographs from stock for reproduction rights.
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PROSPECTIVE CONTRIBUTORS ARE REQUIRED TO WRITE FOR THEIR GUIDELINES BEFORE SUBMITTING. SPECIFY ARTIST OR PHOTOGRAPHER.

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Grants for Conservation Projects: World Birdwatch Vol.8, No.1 Spring of 1986 carries the following announcement: The US Section will consider proposals for grants of up to 1,000 dollars for conservation related projects dealing with NEW WORLD or OLD WORLD vultures. Send proposal, budget, one-page summary and resume of researcher to Richard Plunkett, Chairman ICBP - US Grants Committee, P.O. Box 37, Rupert, VT 05768, U.S.A.

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A visit to India by Graham Madge, George Hill, Crediton, Devon EX17 2Du, United Kingdom:

Karnala Bird Sanctuary: 1 February: We set out at 0530 to avoid the appalling congestion of the Bombay rush hour, for much of our 40-mile drive would be through the town. Nitin drove at first to get some practice then Atul, who had a day off work, took over with Mr. Jamdar's official driver as a silent passenger. We picked up Nitin's friend, the lively Kiran, and our next stop was by some salt marshes where I saw such homely birds as redshank, greenshank, and common sandpiper, but also marsh sandpiper and the black-winged stilts which seem to be by every water here - a very common bird.

A party of little stints took off, disturbed by a marsh harrier, about 50 of them and I have never seen more than two or three at a time before. They gave us a fantastic display of massed flight, with lightning turns as they jinked to and fro, so fast that the eye could hardly follow them - clearly a defensive reaction as no predator could pick on a single bird from such a flickering flock. It is a miracle of synchronisation and one of the most stimulating things I saw in a trip full of exciting things. I still cannot think how they achieve it. I have watched dunlin in flocks of hundreds and even a thousand or so performing in a similar way, but never at such speed or with so instantaneous a flick-over at each turn.

Next stop was at a large jheel by the road - an area of water with much floating vegetation. Here there were pintail, garganey, egrets and a good number of pheasant-tailed jacanas, quite large birds and very graceful, with much white in the wings when they fly. They were in winter plumage and I have yet to see the long, arching tail feathers for the only one I have seen before was a winter visitor to Malaya, where it is very uncommon.

At Karnala we had breakfast at the shack-like restaurant inevitable omelette and sugary chai - served by a pleased man of obvious Himalayan origin (perhaps from Manali?). As we set out to climb the steep stony pathway which winds up to the great outcrop of rock we could see high above us to the left, a party of spotted babblers came through the trees at ground level, giving their lovely whistled contact calls - a nice new species to start off with. But almost immediately we found something even better - an orange-headed ground thrush Zoothera citrina, vigorously picking over leaves as it searched for food. It was the white-throated form with the dark vertical bars on the face, a superb bird which allowed quite close approach, as did another feeding nearby. As we climbed I added the jewel-like little sunbird Nectarinia minima Tickell's flowerpecker and alexandrine parakeet to my life list, and watched a beautiful blossom-headed parakeet, well named for it looked like a brilliant flower with its bright yellow bill and richly coloured head showing above the leaves where it was perched.

Farther up Kiran, searching eagerly for the nuthatch he has yet to see, spotted a small woodpecker which Nitin identified as the pygmy Picoides nana, a delightful little bird and the only member of its family I saw on the whole

trip - which is an indication of the extent to which the woods had forests have been demolished, once you get away from such areas as the Western Ghats and on to the cultivation of the plains. It was one of a bird wave and there was the usual problem of knowing what to look at first. I soon picked up a golden-fronted chloropsis which was new for me, then an old friend of Malayan days, the black-nape blue flycatcher. There was also common woodshrike, black-headed oriole, little minvets, iora and two phylloscopi - one the large-crowned leaf warbler occipitalis and the other unidentified but? large-billed. Earlier we saw common shame but alas, not in song at this time of year. In Malaya I regarded it as a supreme performer with a fantastic repertoire of notes often delivered at breath-taking speed.

With so much of interest to see I had not noticed the steepness of the path but it was becoming steeper, in places almost a scramble, and we were being passed by young boys of St. John's Baptist School, some of them making heavy weather of the climb. At last the path levelled out to a col which leads across to the final scramble to the ruins of the old fortifications built into and round the base of the towering rock, on the cliffs of which a pair of shahēen (Indian PG, sub-sp. peregrinator) are said to nest. We had one falcon flying high overhead but it seemed too thin winged for a PG and I thought perhaps it might be laggar but having watched that species very closely since that doesn't seem right either. so it must go on the unidentified list of raptors which one always collects in new country.

Atul and I decided we had gone far enough so rested while Nitin and Kiran went onto the old fort. Dusky crag martins were flying round and white backed vultures passing. A bird flew into the tree under which Atul was resting with my camera beside him and I called him to look at it (a blue rockthrush) and when I glanced back there was a bonnet monkey walking towards my camera and rucksack! We were just in time to stop it making off with one or other of them. When we were re-joined by N and K we saw a thick-billed flowerpecker come to the tree to feed on the tiny fruits there. Another came and fluttered over it several times and I could clearly see a white line across its crown and down the nape. It seemed to be showing this in display and did it several times. When we got home I wrote a note about it for the Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc. to send to Abdulali. I thought it was probably opening out the feathers of its crown to reveal the white bases but Nitin has since looked at skins and said these are not white. There is no doubt that the white was showing when it approached the

presumed female but not when it was away from her. Perhaps special white erectile feathers are grown for display?

As we returned I realised what a long climb we had - perhaps nearly 2,000 ft, and was ready for a good long drink. In spite of notice at restaurant, 'Sale of liquor prohibited' Atul and I had a large bottle of beer each ('keep it off the table out of sight') which was much appreciated and we all followed our lunch with a siesta - a sound sleep in my case. Then we did some more birding nearby and had a beautiful white-phase male paradise flycatcher, also verditer and grey-headed and a nun babbler which came to my squeak. On the way home we passed a famous water melon area with thousands of the giant green footballs for sale on roadside stalls. We stopped at one to eat slices of the refreshing fruit but it had a strange taste and this was because it was salted! However I ate two slices - and kicked (gently) a sacred cow which was very persistent in trying to raid the stall - the owner threw stones at it - and we moved on to stop again at the jheel where there was now one openbill stork, (another new bird) and about 12 purple gallinules fully in the open with plenty of other birds.

As we got back to the town it was soon nightfall and we were in the streams of inter-weaving traffic where miracles of crash avoidance occur every minute, when the engine cut out. Over heating was diagnosed by Atul, our motor engineer, and we had to push it to the side of the road while hooting maniacs edged past, and raise the bonnet to let it cool off. It was a relief when it started again ten minutes later and we got home without incident, only stopping to buy a couple of plants from a shop I spotted so that I could give them to Mrs. Jamdar and Smita. Mr. Jamdar was waiting for a friend so Nitin, Atul and I went ahead to have dinner. Alas! the salted water melon was making me feel uneasy and I felt I could not take one more spoonful of soup without disgracing myself, so had to ask to be excused. The queasiness passed and I had a good night's rest and able to explain the situation though I felt ashamed at not having been able to eat the dinner they had prepared. The expected guest never arrived though Mr and Mrs Jamdar waited till midnight. He turned up after breakfast next morning having stayed with other friends after a late meeting and some road blockage due to an accident.

This was a very special day out, with the most excellent light-hearted and enthusiastic companions and, following yesterday's trip to Borivli M.P. with Humayun Abdulali



where we apprehended first a boy who had killed a yellow-th. sparrow with a catapult and then a man and youth making off with large bundles of wood illegally taken, has given me an impressive list of birds to begin my visit to India.

Ahmedabad and Nalsarover 4-5 February: The 1st class sleeper, with four to a compartment, on the Bombay night mail to A. was reasonably comfortable. One of my companions, list as "Mr. Rev." turned out to be a R.C. priest, a charming man with whom I had a good conversation and found he had enlightened views on such things as family planning. Arrived at A. 0645 and Lal was there to greet me. It was lovely to see him again (although there is so little to see - he weights about 90 lb!). We were soon in an autoshow and speeding through the town - more miracles as we missed others by mms. His home is near the edge of this Manchester of India - a highly polluted town with many factories - and after a rest we went for a walk in nearby fields where there were birds everywhere, and then across the road to an open area of arid ground with some murky pools where various waders were sampling the delights to be found around them. Desert wheather was a new bird and there were tawny pipits, rufous and bay-backed shrikes and ashy-crowned finchalarks. On our walk we passed a splendid example of craftwerk in the form of an ox cart, beautifully made, the wood being bound with strips of patterned metal. It ought to be in a museum.

After lunch Jayantilal arrived complete with M/C and sidacar. He was to come with us to Nalsarover. Did I object to riding in the sidacar instead of on the bus? Of course not but could we all, with my luggage, be got abroad? J., whom I had met at Manali and recalled once that was pointed out to me, inspires confidence and we were soon loaded with a tent under my legs, my ruck-sack and air travel bag on my knees, a supply of food stowed somewhere, my case tied amidships and Lal perched on the pillion, we whizzed off out of town and along the country roads, myself protecting complexion from windburn with a copy of the Times of India because there was no windshield. It was exhilarating, speeding along under over arching banyan trees in places, and passing bands of colourful nomads and numerous camel-drawn carts laden with cereal crops for it was harvest time. Camels seem to me to be the most mechanical of all draught animals as they plod along like automatons. A lucky roadside stop produced a pair of spotted owlets which Lal heard calling from a nearby tree where they were perched,

cuddled up together - another new bird, close relative of our little owl but without the frowning expression and really a much sweeter.

It was getting towards evening as we neared Nalsarover. Near the lake (Nal = lake) the road has water on either side and there were birds everywhere. On the far side to the left a thousand or so Demoiselle cranes were being joined by flocks coming in and adding to their numbers. At one time the sky seemed full of these splendid birds, great swirling masses as the flock rose and moved across to the other side. There were large flocks of painted storks, spoonbills, pelicans and various herons, egrets and masses of pintail and shoveller. It was like a dream come to life.

At the forest department's buildings (no tourism accommodation here now) we asked if we could stay at the guest house. For this permission was needed from the senior officer living some miles away. J. set off with one of the chaps and Lal said, 'If he says yes I shall be surprised; if he says no, not surprised' but when J. came back it was yes, so instead of putting up the tent and having the discomfort of camping we had a good room and bathroom and very comfortable beds.

Next morning we hired a flat bottomed boat and a man poled us around the shallow lake. Plenty of lovely greater flamingoes, and some lesser, Caspian and gull-billed terns, numerous pintail and shoveller, some common teal, large, middle and little egrets, grey and purple heron, spoonbills, black and sacred ibis, coot perhaps the most numerous bird there, osprey overhead, brown-headed gulls and, a very exciting bird, the enormous greater black-headed gull - 12 in one party and others seen later. Two pelicans of greyish tinge and almost orange pouches were Dalmatians (I saw lots of these at other places later and they are easy to pick out even without seeing the wing pattern in flight. We also had chestnut-bellied sandgrouse, common snipe, black-tailed godwits (many-but Lal once saw the whole area covered with them - perhaps 100,000 probably a build-up on migration). Brahminy ducks (Ruddy shelduck also seen; very colourful and impressive, goose-like birds, with deep voices.

Also seen were glossy ibis, avocets, widgeon, pochard, moorhen, pied kingfisher, curlew, Kentish plover, spotted redshank, gadwall, redshank, pratincole, golden plover and little stint. A special bird was the white-tailed lapwing - the only one I saw on the whole visit.

The previous evening we had the most glorious sunset. From the front of the Guest House one looks across the lake and the whole sky was that indescribable colour one gets in tropical countries, the golden, fulvous glow, which was reflected in the water, with an osprey in silhouette against the sky as it flew to and fro hunting late above the lake. Then the full moon rose behind me looking so crisp and clear that one felt it could almost be touched. It was a deeply moving moment.

Nalsarover has some problems. I hear a rumour of trapping ducks by non-vegetarian locals, and if boat trips are too frequent they could have a disturbing effect, especially if people chase after the feeding birds for close view or photography. But it is clearly a very important wintering area and staging post for migrants and one can only be glad it is protected as a bird sanctuary. I would have liked to stay longer but our programme drew us inexorably on and, in order to get to Tangathra and the Little Rann of Kutch we had to be at Sanad to catch a bus by 1930. So we loaded up and got on the road, stopping here and there to look at birds of interest. An obvious laggar falcon flew over us and away before I could check any details to make quite sure it was not a saker (some are said to winter in north India), and we had a pied chat - like a stonechat but black and white. There was a mass of vultures by the roadside about 10 Km before Sanad and we stopped to look at them. About 60 were surrounding two buffalo carcasses and there were more on the ground and in a tree across a field. There were plenty of white backs and some longbills but there were also bigger vultures with brown plumage and pale heads and we commented on them but the fact that we were looking at griffons Cypse fulvous did not dawn on me till later on when Richard and his party saw a crowd of about 500 vultures of 5 species while we were at Hingolgadh - griffon, whiteback, longbill, Egyptian and and one black which is rare, but no king (also rare).

Jayantilal and I walked across the field hoping we might find a king vulture and we had the ponderous great birds flapping heavily along the ground ahead of us. Then I stopped a raptor perched on a low tree farther on and we decided to check it while Lal kindly remained with the bike. As we walked we saw small mongooses and then a pale, brownish shrike with rufous-tinged tail - none other than isabelline (a new bird, as I missed the one at Berry Head, Devon, last autumn, so that omission was made good). As we walked on in the quite hot sunshine we could see storks coming in high over a field some way ahead, and planning down until they were out of sight behind a high bank. As we approached the

eagle, which looked black as it sat in the tree, it took off and flew away from us with heavy wing beats. The upper surface was very dark with no white on the wing at all and a very clear, narrow white crescent on the rump at base of tail. At first I thought lesser spotted but on looking them up it was too dark, had too clear white showing on rump, and the lesser spotted I remember from Zambia had a small white almost rectangular patch on the upper wing surface, which is shown well in the illustrations I have looked up, especially in Birds of Western Palaearctic. So I feel safe in claiming this as my first greater spotted eagle - thanks to Jayantilal whose idea it was to have a closer look at it.

Having gone so far we decided to go farther and check the storks, and how fortunate this was! We approached under cover of the bank, sneaked up it and peered over. There were about 70 painted storks, 50 demoiselle cranes, a few grey herons, redwattled lapwings, some teal on a small pond and? I could hardly believe my eyes? 35 magnificent sarus cranes. They were so near and as we moved higher first the ducks took off, then the demoiselles and herons, followed by the storks; but the sarus cranes held their ground and, after gazing our fill, we left them there. They have long been regarded as sacred in India and being unmolested have become fearless and allow close approach. This was one of the most thrilling moments I have had in many years of bird watching for it was a complete surprise and we were so close to those towering, aristocratic and graceful birds. There is an indelible picture of them painted on my mind.

Also tawny eagle seen here with a pale patch on outer, upper wing - prob, immature. We had to leave and hurried on to Sanad, stopping only to have a close look at a white-eyed buzzard perched on a telegraph pole - immature, but another new bird for me and I am glad we stopped for I saw very few others during the trip. At Sanad, after some skilful manouevring through crowded streets (market day) Lal and I got off at the bus station while J. went off to park the bike with a friend. At this out of the way place all bus notices were in Gujarati and no one seemed to speak English and I soon became the centre of attention with a crowd of people and children with smiling faces gathered round to look as if I had dropped from outer space. They just didn't seem to get tired of looking, though they were dispersing after about 20 minutes!

When the bus came in it was full with people already standing. Nothing deterred, J. forced his way on with my

case and Lal and I squeezed in somehow with yet others following until we were packed so tight that there was hardly room for my feet. How the poor conductor gets round to take tickets I can't think. He just seems to slither between the people. We played a game - birds' names beginning with A,B,C etc. to pass the time and eventually some people got off and I got a seat. What a relief! More people left at various stops. and we settled down to the long drive to Thangathra. It was 1030 when we got there and bundled into an autoshow and set off for Uday Voral's house, hoping they would not all be in bed. Fortunately they were still up, including the baby, so we had some tea and a good chat with Uday, who is the officer in charge of the Little Rann Nature Reserve, and has found where the flamingoes are breeding after they had moved from their traditional 'flamingo city'. Unfortunately he has to be off to an important meeting some distance away early in the morning, and his jeep is under repair, so it was decided that we would have a taxi with Uday's driver to guide us, to look for the wild asses and go to a place way out somewhere, where large numbers of common cranes have been coming to water. Slept well but heard Uday come into the room at 0530 to get some papers from a cupboard before leaving to catch a bus, so, poor chap, he had only had a few hour's sleep. (to be continued.....)

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Birds in Doddagubbi by Richard Fitter: When I was at Doddagubbi two years ago, the tank, which had provided such excellent birdwatching on previous visits, had become quite dry. Since it was quite a large tank, extending to 100 acres, I was astonished as well as sorry. So I was delighted on my visit in February 1986 to find some water again in one corner of the tank. There was not very much water, but it was enough to provide a splendid morning's birdwatching. To start with the largest birds, five painted storks made a splendid spectacle as they walked in a line feeding head down in the shallow water. Then there were three or four white-necked storks standing round the edge, but not feeding. Among the herons there was a single grey heron, a single little egret, which flew off revealing the yellow soles of its feet, a small party of cattle egrets, assorted pond herons and another large singleton, a great white egret, or great white heron as we should perhaps get used to calling it again, now that the taxonomists have transferred it from the genus Egretta to the genus Ardea.

The water was so shallow that only one species of waterfowl was present in the shape of three common teal, but there were more than a dozen species of wader. The largest of these was the black-winged stilt, followed by a small party of greenshanks, together with their smaller look alike, the marsh sandpiper. The snipe were presumably pintail snipe, since the authorities agree that this is a much commoner species in southern India than the fantail snipe. A party of Temminck's stints and two curlew-sandpipers, together with a common sandpiper and quite a number of wood sandpipers, completed the tally of waders other than plovers. On an adjacent rice paddy there were also two green sandpipers. The list of plovers was headed by some handsome red-wattled plovers, followed by quite a party of 20 or more little ringed plovers and a smaller number of Kentish plovers.

The only other distinctively waterside birds were a male marsh harrier, which stayed on the ground by the water's edge all the time and never gave a display of his graceful flight, and a few wagtails, mainly white but also one grey.

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The white and black storks by Lavkumar Khachar, Hingolqadh Nature Conservation, 14 Javant Society, Rajkot 360 004:

While no one can be happy about the tremendous size in human population in our country, we certainly must rejoice at the apparent increase in white stork numbers in Gujarat. Why I mention these two facts is that these attractive birds are believed by Europeans to bring babies and drop them down chimneys - or so they tell their children when posed with the not very very surprising question children ask about their origin. Fortunately, our Ministers and their attendant flunkies have not been brought up on this fable as otherwise we might well have orders being issued to either shoot the birds or shoo them away from our country - this is no joke really, since we had a leader demanding that artificial rain be caused to break the desperate drought!

Some two decades ago, a white stork in a mornings birdwatch was cause for excitement and even in the Bhal country south of Nal Sarovar where they were normally to be seen, their numbers never were large. It is not unusual to find upto a hundred of them feeding together. They are also a regular sight on the sparse grassy "beds" in the little Rann of Kutch. Not only are the numbers

increasing, but the areas visited are expanding.

We have been seeing the black stork more frequently in Saurashtra of late. I saw my first black stork in the 1970's! Today one or half a dozen are not unusual on the reservoirs. Either the numbers have increased or the birds are being driven out of a wider wintering range.

While the white stork ranges out onto grasslands and dry fallow fields, the black stork spends its time near water. Adult openbilled storks *Anastomus oscitans* have the same colour pattern as the white stork and at a quick glance can be confused with it, but the latter's red legs and daggershaped red bill are very distinctive. The white necked stork *ciconia episcopus* sitting hunched up might be mistaken for the black stork, but normally the white neck is very distinctive.

All storks are large birds and have broad wings which aid them in soaring like vultures. This permits them along with pelicans to cover large areas in search of suitable wetlands. Our resident species of storks are very mobile though they do tend to converge on traditional nesting sites. It becomes very important then, to identify such locations, and to have the trees strictly protected, and where ever possible, trees should be planted on raised bundhs in wetland areas to provide nesting locations.

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#### CORRESPONDENCE

My observations of white backed vultures by Snehal S. Patel,  
81 Sarjan Society, Surat, 395007: One particular group of vultures which I observed, used to gather around a small lake in the early part of the day after sunrise, and one by one they used to take a dip in the cold water at a particular spot where it was shallow. They would then walk to a small field beside the lake and spread their wings open with their back to the sun for sun drying - exactly the same way humans do on a beach.

By the time everyone finished their bath, the complete field would get covered with the sunbathers drying off their feathers. I was reminded of freshly laundered jackets spread out to dry on the grass!

As this group was large, birds had to wait for their turn in the water, but it seemed they were in no hurry,

and we apparently prepared to do things in a leisurely fashion. There was no pushing or jostling around like mere mortals tend to do. After the wings dried, many of the birds would lie down flat on the ground and doze. Then suddenly a few of the birds would take off and the rest would follow, and their unending search for food would start.

These vultures are very regular, every morning between 9.30 am and 10 am a group of about 50 to 70 of them glided past my premises from west to east and in the evening they returned at around 5 p.m. It is a well known fact that vultures use thermals pockets of hot air rising up as the ground gets heated up. They simply have to glide up on the rising air upto a great height from where they scan the ground below for dead or dying animals. This group of vultures have put modern industry to good use - they are high up in the sky well before the thermals become strong enough to provide a lift - by using rising smoke columns of factory chimneys! They can be watched spiralling upwards in the smoke. Once they have gained some height they slip out and glide across to another smoke column, the speed they gain on the glide sends them up higher in the other smoke column.

Lavkumar Khachar, to whom I sent my observations, tells me that he has come across once seen a dozen vultures on the ground, heavy with feeding off a carcasse, run towards a passing whirlwind and getting air-bourne in the whirling column of rising dust.

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About Vultures by A.P.Gupta, C/o. Eklavya, 293 Vivekanand Colony, Ujjain 456 001, M.P.: It was interesting to read Arun Kumar Banerjee's observations about the smelling powers of vultures (Newsletter, Nov-Dec.1984).

The following are some extracts from 'A text-book of Zoology' by Parker and Haswell (Seventh edition revised by A.J. Marshall):

"The olfactory sense in most birds is notoriously poor, but Apteryx (Kiwi) is distinguished by the high development of the olfactory chamber, which extends from the tip of the beak to the level of the optic foreminae."

....."Also sea-going procellariiformes (petrels, albatrosses), which emit a characteristically strong and peculiar odour possess remarkably developed olfactory



- organs.... There is some evidence that these sea-scavengers locate their food partly by scent. It is possible (but not proved) that vultures, also possessed of a remarkably complex olfactory apparatus, may do likewise".

It should be possible to perform some simple experiments to find out whether vultures have a well developed sense of smell or not.

Another interesting observation about vultures comes from Martin woodcock in 'Collins' Hand guide to the Birds of the Indian Sub-continent'.

".....Although a disgusting feeder, often entering a carcase to pull out the entrails, it misses no opportunity to bathe when water is available".

Amazing, isn't it? I have seen many a vulture, but never of the bathing type. What about other readers?

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#### Azad Memorial Lecture by Dr.Salim Ali (Concluded):

xxxxxxxThey lay eggs in the soil, each female laying several capsules or egg-masses of 50 to a hundred eggs each. On a S.African farm of 3300 acres no less than 14 tons of eggs have been dug up, estimated to have produced 1250 million locusts. Locust swarms, often covering up to 300 square km and consisting of hundreds of million insects, are sometimes so thick as to obscure the sun, and when on the ground may hold up railway traffic by causing the wheels of locomotives to slip on the tracks. A visitation of such proportions will, in the course of a few short hours, reduce a smiling green tract of hundreds of hectares into a desolate waste of bare stems. White storks and Rosy Pastors and many other birds are traditional predators and take relentless toll of locusts throughout the year although their activities may make little apparent dent at the time of actual swarming.

A large proportion of the normal food of the majority of birds consists of insects. Some idea of the vast extent of their beneficent activities may be obtained from the fact that many young birds in the first few days of their lives consume more than their own weight of food in 24 hours. Even those species that are predominantly granivorous as adults feed their nest-young almost entirely on

soft bodied protein-rich insects till they are fledged. Birds have phenomenal appetites. The energy required for flight is generated by their rapid digestion and the efficiency of their metabolism. Birds of Prey, such as the hawks and owls, often unjustly accused of delinquency and slaughtered out of hand, are amongst the most important of Nature's checks on rats and mice, the most fecund and destructive non-insect pests from which men and his works suffer. Rats have a staggering reproduction potential. They produce 6 litters of an average 8 young per annum, and begin to breed when 3 and half months old. Hypothetically this means that if the progeny was of equal sexes, and all the young survived, a single pair would increase to 880 rats by the year's end! As is well known, these rodents are responsible for the destruction of between 10 and 25 percent of our entire food crops annually, either in the field or as stored grain. A scientific investigation undertaken in the rice growing tracts of the Indus Delta in Lower Sind before partition — in 1926 — revealed the annual damage caused by the Sind Mole Rat (Gunomys indicus, now Bandicota bengalensis kok) in that area to be between 10 and 50 percent of the total crop and of the order of Rs. 23 lakhs. And that was at a time when paddy was selling at 12 kg per rupee, again believe it or not! Owls and the diurnal birds of prey are some of Nature's most important controls on rodent populations. The food of the larger owls consists chiefly of rats and mice. It has been found that a single such owl takes 2 or 3 rats per night. Every two rats destroyed hypothetically means a potential suppression of 880 rats annually. And considering that this good work is carried on for 365 nights in a year with no strikes and no paid holidays, and not by a single owl but by the entire local population of owls, some idea of the untold good they do may be obtained.

Another of the more important activities and impacts of birds on our national economy, which has not yet been properly appreciated or studied, is their role in the fertilization of flowers and the dispersal of seeds, and thus on the character of our indigenous flora and natural vegetation. Many species of birds are adapted morphologically by the structure of their bill and tongue for a diet of nectar and are in a great measure responsible for cross-pollinating certain flowers in the same as bees and butterflies. There are reciprocal adaptations in ornithophilous flowers — or 'bird flowers' as they are popularly known ... to promote cross-pollination in the process of nectar seeking by the bird visitor. It may not be generally known that the large showy rosy red flowers of the semal or silk cotton

tree (*Bombax ceiba*); which carry a generous supply of nectar, are largely dependent on birds for their fertilization and thus for the natural regeneration of the semal tree, and the sustained yield of the principal basic soft wood for our flourishing safety match industry, which has an annual turnover of several crore rupees. A good example of beneficial seed dispersal by frugivorous birds is the mulberry (*Morus alba*) tree first planted on the banks of irrigation canals in the desert areas of Punjab as a sand-binding and anti-erosion measure. The birds took to the fruit avidly and returned the bounty by broadcasting the seeds in their dropping far and wide, creating abundant natural regeneration of the mulberry tree and showing the way for commercial plantations. Mulberry wood constitutes the principal raw material for the thriving sports goods industry for which Punjab has become famous. In 1976-77 India exported over Rs.2 crore worth of sports goods, such as cricket bats, hockey sticks, tennis and badminton rackets and other items, to the benefit of our Foreign Exchange reserves. The Sandalwood tree (*Santalum album*), one of the major revenue producers in Karnataka State, also owes its natural abundance to the broadcasting of its seeds by frugivorous birds.

It must be conceded, however, that like most good things in life, the activities of birds are also double-sided. On the debit side of their account must be entered in bold letters their highly negative role in the propagation of noxious weeds, either by fertilizing their flowers such as of the ornithophilous mistletoes (of the plant family Loranthaceae) or by the dispersal of their undigested viable seeds, as also those, for example, of the pernicious Lantana weed. The mistletoes -- locally known as 'bandha' or 'karazdar' -- are plant parasites that infest orchard trees like mango or guava, and valuable timber stands such as teak and sal. By boring its roots into the tissues of the host-tree and sucking the sap -- its life blood -- the parasite reduces bearing capacity in the former case, and retards normal growth of wood in the latter, causing considerable economic loss to fruit grower and forester alike. The thousands of square kilometres that have been overrun and rendered unproductive by the Lantana, though a comparatively recent exotic plant introduction, owes largely to the appeal of its lavishly produced berries to fruit-eating birds.

Birds often pose problems other than the direct harm they sometimes do to Man's food resources and allied concerns which, however, they largely compensate, by their counter-vailing beneficent services. For instance, they unwittingly act as hosts of zoo parasites, both internal and external or as carriers of vectors of pathogenic viruses of Man and his livestock, and disseminate them across the world in the course of their migratory wanderings. In recent years a further cause for their indictment has arisen, namely the increasing hazard they pose to aviation. This has become a serious worldwide problem with the development of fast flying jet aircraft. In spite of considerable sophisticated research in all advanced countries no permanent solution is yet in sight. In India it is chiefly kites and vultures that are responsible for causing serious 'bird strikes' or direct collisions with aircraft, frequently resulting in fatal crashes. Small birds occasionally get sucked into the air intakes of jet engines necessitating extremely expensive repairs or even the complete scrapping of costly engines. Whether birds deserve the blame for such mishaps, or Man himself for trespassing into the bird's pristine domain, is, of course, a matter of opinion!

However, taking all things into the reckoning, there is little doubt that the good birds do far outweighs the harm, and they therefore deserve the most stringent protection. It is a hackneyed common-place, nevertheless only too true--and more so in this increasing material age -- that Man does not live by bread alone. By the gorgeousness of their plumages and the loveliness of their forms, by the vivaciousness of their movements and the sweetness of their songs birds typify Life and Beauty. Verily they number among those important trifles that supplement bread in the sustenance of Man and make his living worth while. And to close this plea on behalf of the birds, and for their protection and conservation, I can do no better than quote the introductory remarks of a world renowned biologist the late Sir A. Landsborough Thomson, Chairman of a symposium held in London a few years ago on 'The Problems of Birds as Pests'. He said: "Birds are to a great extent economically beneficial; they are also, of course, scientifically interesting and aesthetically delightful. Yet some species tend to be harmful, and others become pests when present in excessive numbers or in the wrong places. Our task is, dispassionately and objectively, to determine the facts and consider what to do".

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*Front Cover:* THE MASKED BOOBY (*Sula dactylatra*)

Courtesy K. S. HARSHVARDHANA BHAT

*Back Cover:* A FEMALE GREAT INDIAN BUSTARD AT KARERA

Photograph by ASAD R. RAHMANI

**Editor:** Zafar Futehally

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